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Doctoral Theses

Zoltán Varga:

THE QUESTION OF GENRE IN THE ANIMATED FILM

Philosophy Doctoral School

Leader of the doctoral school: Prof. Dr. János Kelemen, CMHAS., full professor

Doctoral Program in Film, Media and Contemporary Culture

Leader of the doctoral program: Dr. Péter György, DSc., full professor

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The theses of the doctoral dissertation

The discussed themes and the aim of the dissertation

The theme of the dissertation links two topics together: it approaches the animated film from the point of view of genre theory. The text focuses on a theme which can be considered as a highly ignored question in the field of the theory of the animated film and genre theory: it discusses the relationship between genres and animation.

According to the basic hypothesis of the dissertation, there are no such genres that can emerge in the animated film only, whereas they can not appear in the live-action film. This assumption is about the relationship of the live-action and the animated film, and points at a more general theoretical conclusion: in a given medium genres do not depend on purely technical determinants.

In the course of the demonstration I reviewed the publications on the generic questions of the animated film, and I refuted their main statements. To prove my own hypothesis, I examined the possible animated variations on the popular film genres. I focused on the following question: are the components which contribute to shaping genres hindered by the animated film forms, or can we find a kind of adaptation process in which the attributes of the animated and the genre characteristics can work together? The aim of the explanation was to prove that the differences between the animated and the live-action film have no effect on the phenomenon of genre. This means that the different practices of filmmaking do not exclude the functioning of genre characteristics.

The structure of the dissertation

The first unit of the dissertation establishes the theoretical framework, reviewing the questions of genre theory and the theory of the animated film. The first chapters include topics such as the ordinary use of the notion of genre, and its position in the different approaches to art and art forms in general, however the most emphasized area of these tendencies is the genre theory of literature which had an obvious effect on the genre theory of film. After delineating the still debated problems of filmic genre theory, I attempted to define the notion of film genre. I also approached the animated film as a discussed phenomenon, and attempted to outline a definition which can help to eliminate the problems that come from the different approaches to the animated film. Discussing the animated film, I examined its unique aesthetic characteristics (basically the creationism and artificiality); I emphasized the possibility of the intermedial interpretation of the animated film; I dealt with the differences between the live-action and the animated film as well as their similarities, and I observed the position the animated film has in the system of film types. Then I linked together the conclusions of the two discussed theoretical fields, considering the possible generic classification of the animated film. After reviewing the writings on genre in the animated film that have been published to date, I highlighted my thesis: the animated film has no such genres which can not be realized in the live-action film.

In the second unit of my dissertation I proved this thesis by examining the animated versions of popular film genres prevalent in the live-action film. I studied three generic corpora, focusing on individual films, series and full-length films, as well: firstly, the crime genres (detective fiction, film noir, thriller); secondly, the fantastic genres (science fiction, fantasy, horror); and thirdly the comedy (especially certain comedy-subgenres such as slapstick or burlesque and parody). With the animated variants of these genres, I pointed out that the use of the animated characteristics and the presence of genre components do not exclude each other, even if they are not equally emphasized in every case.

The major points and results of the explanation

The starting point of the review of genre theory is the contradictory fact that although it is relatively simple to define the notion of genre (*basically it is a concept which allows us to categorize texts and/or works of arts by gathering their identical or similar characteristics*), genre is still a quite flexible phenomenon, as some film theoreticians also mention it (especially Tom Gunning¹, and Torben Grodal²). What leads to further complications in the use of the concept of genre is that it can be connected to any medium (thus genre is an intermedial phenomenon), and consequently, the basic principles of generic classification are not consistent at all, not even in one single medium. (This problem also appeared in filmic genre theory.) As literary genre theory is evidently the most complex genre theory, I made references to some of its basic statements, considering the fact that filmic genre theory can be seen as a follower of the literary genre theory, at least to some degree and especially during its first period. After outlining the arguments on the impossibility of a valid filmic genre theory (i. e. David Bordwell's³), I referred to the works of the prominent figures of genre theory such as Rick Altman, Steve Neale, Barry Keith Grant, and – in Hungarian film theory – Jenő Király⁴. Considering the *double reduction* of the concept of film genre (the notion not only refers to feature films, but within this type of film, it is connected to popular works, as well), I stated that *genres are a group of films that are characterized by a relatively stable system of constant thematic elements and show recognizable realization of the narration and/or the stylistic elaboration*. I also discussed a question which has been highly disregarded in filmic genre theory: can we outline such basic generic categories in films as the ones that exist in literature, i.e. lyrical poetry, epic poetry and drama? I refused some answers (i.e. Péter Hamar's⁵), while I accepted others (i.e. Alan Williams', Steve Neale's⁶), and the conclusion of this examination is that three basic generic forms can be separated based on what is their relationship to the photographic reproduction, and how they are connected to narrativity: the documentary, the feature film and the experimental film. Finally, I paid attention to the openness and the intermediality of film genres: on the one hand, genres – and especially Steve Neale points to it – can be interpreted as processes, and this allows many generic variants within a given genre; on the other hand, the majority of film genres is eventually part of an intermedial system, or in other words, they have their predecessors and variants in literature and/or theatre (or sometimes in comics).

¹ Gunning, Tom: Those Drawn with a Very Fine Camel Hair Brush. The Origins of Film Genres. *Iris* 1995/19. pp. 49–61.

² Grodal, Torben: *Moving Pictures. A New Theory of Film Genres, Feeling, and Cognition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. Ch. 7: "A Typology of Genres of Fiction", pp. 157–181.

³ Bordwell, David: *Making Meaning. Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge – London: Harvard University Press, 1988. pp. 146–151.

⁴ Altman, Rick: A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre. In: Grant, Barry Keith (ed.): *Film Genre Reader III*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. pp. 27–41; Altman, Rick: Reusable Packaging. In: Browne, Nick (ed.): *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. pp. 1–41. Altman, Rick: *Film/Genre*. London: BFI/Palgrave Macmillan, 1999; Neale, Steve: *Genre*. London: British Film Institute, 1980; Neale, Steve: Questions of Genre. *Screen* 1990/1. pp. 66–89; Neale, Steve: *Genre and Hollywood*. London – New York: Routledge, 2000; Grant, Barry Keith: *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology*. London – New York: Wallflower, 2007; Király, Jenő: Bevezetés a népszerű filmkultúra vizsgálatába. In: Király Jenő (ed.): *Film és szórakozás. Mokép – Magyar Filmtudományi Intézet és Filmarchívum*, 1981. pp. 3–50; Király, Jenő: *Frivol művészet I–II*. Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 1993; Király, Jenő: *Mágikus mozi. Műfajok, mítoszok, archetipusok a filmkultúrában*. Budapest: Korona, 1998.

⁵ Hamar, Péter: *A játékfilm műneveinek és műfajainak rendszere*. Nyiregyháza, 1987.

⁶ Neale: Questions of Genre.

I originated the difficulties of defining the animated film⁷ from the fact that the attempts of making definitions tend to blur the line between the basic technical principle of all animated films and the many diverse forms of the animated film. The most common and most simple explanation of the animated film is technical, which refers to a special way of the filmmaking practice. *The animated film is created by frame by frame recording.* However, I did not narrow down the definition of the animated film to this purely technical aspect. I also took some of the basic characteristics of animated films into consideration, such as the creationism and the artificiality: the former refers to the fact that the artist may have a maximal control over the *mise-en-scène*, while the latter means the “double sense of animated images” among other things (I borrow this term from María Lorenzo Hernández), which is “a conceptual movement that calls attention to the surface of representation, instead of its actual contents”⁸. These phenomena are connected to the animated forms which have two main categories: 1.) the group of plastic (or stop-motion) animated forms that are based on the tactile manipulation of spatially given elements (i.e. puppets, clay figures); 2.) the group of graphic animated forms which presuppose the sequentiality of manually made (i.e. drawn) or computer-generated images. Adding these aspects to the technical principle, I outlined a more sophisticated definition: *the animated film is a collective category of those special film forms (i.e. cartoon, puppet film, clay animation etc.) which can be based on the process of frame by frame recording.*

I also delineated the main characteristics of individual animated forms; then I discussed the relationship between the animated film and other art forms. The main statement of the latter examination is that the animated film has a much closer relationship with painting, comics or puppet theatre than the live-action film. In addition, animation has several connections with music, dance and video games, as well. Partly due to these strong intermedial relationships, it has been emphasized many times that the animated film is basically different from the live-action film. However, I attempted to correct these exaggerating ideas which tend to overrate the differences between the animated and the live-action film and ignore their similarities. In this regard, although my argument accepted that the animated imagery has such possibilities and diversity that surpass the limits of the live-action film imagery indeed, I found it important to note that in some ways they also share common characteristics, such as certain attributes of the images (i.e. shots, photographic parameters) and the way in which the images are connected (i.e. camera movements, cutting). (More important differences can be discovered in the layer of the sound: the animated film primarily uses noises and tends to eliminate speech.) Animation can be compatible with the majority of the three basic generic forms, especially with the feature film and the experimental film, and even if the animated film as a documentary would be contradictory, some artists and films have already attempted to reconcile these filmic practices.

After discussing the genre questions and the theory of animation, I observed how the animated film can be interpreted from the point of view of the generic concept. First of all, I refuted a rather frequently appearing idea which claims that the animated film itself is a genre. Then I focused on the possibilities of the generic classification of the animated film, especially on the question whether the animated film has such genres that belong to the animated film in a medial sense and therefore can not be realized in the live-action film. To

⁷ During the examination of the animated film, I relied on some of the most important books of this field: Wells, Paul: *Understanding Animation*. London – New York: Routledge, 1998; Furniss, Maureen: *Art in Motion. Animation Aesthetics*. London: John Libbey, 1998; Dobson, Nichola: *The A to Z of Animation and Cartoons*. Lanham – Toronto – Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010; Laybourne, Kit: *The Animation Book*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998.

⁸ Hernández, María Lorenzo: The Double Sense of the Animated Images. A View on the Paradoxes of Animation as a Visual Language. *Animatin Studies* 2007/2. <http://journal.animationstudies.org/download/volume2/ASVol2Art5MLHernandez.pdf> (Last visited: 30.04.2011)

outline my answer, I had to refute the single attempt that has been made to examine such problems. Even if Paul Wells⁹ pays attention to the animated variants of genres known in the live-action film, his strongest ambition is to delineate the unique genre typology of the animated film. According to the core of Wells' argument, "*all animation works as a version of fine art in motion, and recalls the generic principles which have evolved in art practice*".¹⁰ Consequently, the animated film has its own generic deep structures, and based on them, Wells separates seven animated genres: formal, deconstructive, political, abstract, re-narration, paradigmatic and primal. However, the definitions and descriptions of these suggested animated genre categories are rather sketchy, quite obscure, and what is more, the biggest problem is that there are several live-action films which could also be interpreted from the point of view of the genre categories of Wells. That is why Wells' ambition to define the animated genre categories *against* the live-action film inevitably fails. My argument is that this attempt was necessarily unsuccessful because such unique animated genres do not exist in case the filmic genericity is considered as independent from the aspects of the technical realization.

In the second unit of my dissertation I attempted to prove my thesis by investigating the genre characteristics – established in the live-action film – appearing in the animated film. I paid attention to thematic elements, narrative strategies and audiovisual, or in other words, stylistic components. Every chapter discusses the general characteristics of the examined genres first. Then they deal with the question whether the genres have certain elements which seem to be applicable to the tendencies of the animated forms. The possible connections between the genres and the animated forms are discussed by means of several examples, some of which are mentioned briefly, while others are treated in more details.

As far as the crime genres are concerned, regarding the typical characters, their activities and the usual plot structures, we can definitely find the detective film (i.e. *The Great Mouse Detective*) and the cop movie (i.e. *Captain of the Forest*) in the animated film. The suspense which has key importance in the thriller genre can also work in some animated films (i.e. *The Suspect*, *101 Dalmatians*), however, in other cases even the thematic characteristics are completely based on the generic expectations (i.e. *Perfect Blue*). In the animated versions of film noir, not only characters and plot structures appear from the genre, but stylistic devices, as well: *chiaroscuro* fits the tools of the graphic animated forms very well (the most complex example for animated film noir is *Batman: The Animated Series*). It is a tendency in animated crime films that some of them offer more decent versions of the genres (i.e. certain animated films obviously take the edge off the violent content or eliminate it), while others are much closer to genre conventions, yet the benefits of the animated form are somehow restricted (especially in *Perfect Blue*). The phenomenon of anthropomorphism can be considered as a special animated feature added to the process of applying the genres: in many cases animal characters with human attributes appear in those roles that belong to genre conventions (i.e. detective, gangster). Anthropomorphism as a unique animated possibility can be discovered in the case of other genres, as well.

The relationship between the animated film and the fantastic genres is closer. Though every fantastic genre has a different connection with the irrational elements (i.e. the horror has some tendencies which eliminate the fantastic entirely; the science fiction mixes the irrational motifs with scientific explanations; and the fantasy uses the irrationality in the most complex way), according to my argument the empirical presuppositions of the fantastic genres and the irrationality of animation have some common characteristics. In fact, what animated film is in

⁹ Wells, Paul: *Genre in Animation*. In: Wells, Paul: *Animation: Genre and Authorship*. London – New York: Wallflower Press, 2002. pp. 41–71.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 66.

the film medium in general, that is the group of fantastic genres in the generic system – both of them can be treated as radical moving away from the reflecting of reality. I examined in detail the conception of reality and the creation of imagery in the science fiction and the fantasy, especially in connection with the attributes of the animated film. The former topic shows that while science fiction can partially be linked to the virtual omnipotent nature of the animated film, the conception of magical worlds in the fantasy is much more similar to the animated film; the latter is about the parallelism between the dominance of visual effects in these genres – this phenomenon can be connected to the cinema of attractions, a concept established by Tom Gunning¹¹ – and the creationism and artificiality which are inherent in the animated film. I proved these points by referring to such films as *The Iron Giant*, *Egon & Dönci*, *Wall-E*, and *The Fantastic Planet*. In the case of horror, which partially belongs to the fantastic genres, we also find some generic elements that can be closely related to the possibilities of the animated film. The destruction and the decomposition of bodies and the motif of metamorphosis – which elements have key importance in the horror genre – virtually get new dimensions due to the special devices of the graphic and the clay animation (i.e. *Virile Games*, *Wicked City*, *The Hunger*); at the same time the puppet animation is frequently used as a medium to create the phenomenon of the *uncanny* (i.e. *The Sandman*, *Vincent*). When I discussed the genre of comedy, first of all I had to deal with some general problems concerning the question of laughter and humour, because it is not easy to define their nature. (One of the most important texts I relied on to elaborate my argument was the book about comedy by Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik.¹²) I discussed what the reasons for the very strong relationship between comedy and animation could be, and what the main tendencies of this connection are. I considered not only factors rooted in the history of film (i.e. the effect of the silent live-action slapstick on the popular cartoons), but also psychological and aesthetical phenomena, such as the humour of infantilism and the application of satirical humour in animation. The examination of the animated comedy in detail focused on two subgenres: I considered the burlesque as a comedy type based on visual humour, or in other words, gags; and I approached parody as the case of mocking aesthetical phenomena. My argument demonstrated that the burlesque – and I used the writings of Iván Hevesy¹³ on this comedy subgenre – has attributes that are basically identical with some characteristics of the cartoon: the irrational elements are important, the characters are virtually invulnerable, the gags are close to the fantastic and figurative phrases are often interpreted literally. The best examples of the animated burlesque can be found among the classical seven-minute-long American cartoons, especially in the oeuvre of Tex Avery and Chuck Jones¹⁴, and one of my main statements is that the cartoon offers new dimensions for the burlesque if it allows the *radical extension* of gags, because in the cartoon even the graphical components can become the source of the humorous effect. Parody was examined from the point of view of genre parodies in particular, focusing on different cases: firstly, the same series incorporates parodies of several genres (the *Wallace and Gromit* films make fun of crime genres, science fiction and

¹¹ Gunning, Tom: *The Cinema of Attractions. Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde*. In: Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.): *Early Cinema*. London: BFI, 1992. pp. 56–62.

¹² Neale, Steve – Krutnik, Frank: *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. London – New York: Routledge, 1990.

¹³ Hevesy, Iván: A burleszk. In: Hevesy, Iván: *A filmjáték esztétikája és dramaturgiája*. Budapest: Magyar Filmtézet – Műzsák Közművelődési Kiadó, 1985. pp. 199–217.

¹⁴ Adamson, Joe: *Tex Avery, King of Cartoons*. New York: Popular Library, 1975; Adamson, Joe: *Bugs Bunny. Fifty Years and Only One Grey Hare*. London: Pyramid Books, 1990; Canemaker, John: *Tex Avery. The MGM Years 1942–1955*. Turner Pub, 1996; Jones, Chuck: *Chuck Amuck. The Life and Times of an Animated Cartoonist*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989; Klein, Norman M.: *7 Minutes. The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon*. London: Verso, 1993; Lenburg, Jeff: *The Great Cartoon Directors*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1993; Thompson, Richard: *Meep Meep*. In: Nichols, Bill (ed.): *Movies and Methods*. Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, 1976. pp. 126–135.

horror); secondly, the same type of genre parody appears in different films (*The Incredibles* and *Megamind* are parodies of the superhero genre); and finally, I observed how mixing genres in an atypical way can be the strategy of genre parody (most significantly in *Cat City*).

The animated variations of the examined genres proved that combining the genres of popular live-action film with the animated film forms can be considered as a dynamic adaptation process. Both the animated form and the genre can apply certain self-restrictions (i.e. the usual themes of the genre appear in a more child-friendly way; or the special animated devices are used only partially), while both of them can intensify the characteristics of each other – especially in the case of those genres that have strong connections with sensational and/or unusual visual elements. To sum up, the differences between the animated and the live-action film do not hinder the genre characteristics – themes, narrative devices and stylistic attributes – in functioning. Consequently, this means that genericity does not depend on the technical realization, and the animated film does not have such genres that could not appear in the live-action film, and we can say the opposite, as well: the live-action film does not have such genres either that could not be realized in the animated film.

Selected writings on the themes of the dissertation:

- 1.) Bats from the Pinewoods. The Animator Tim Burton. *Filmvilág* 2008/2. pp. 12–15.
- 2.) Some Thoughts on the Animated Film. *Enigma* 2008/3. pp. 23–40.
- 3.) Wordless Worlds? Some Notes on the Verbality in Animated Films through the Use of Verbality in Péter Szoboszlai's Animated Films. In: Pethő Ágnes (ed.): *Words and Images on the Screen: Language, Literature, Moving Pictures*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008. pp. 242–256.
- 4.) Borders Erased. Live-action and animated films mixed, modes of transition between the two. *Metropolis* 2009/1. pp. 36–54.
- 5.) The Animated Film – Annotated Filmography. *Metropolis* 2009/1. pp. 70–92.
- 6.) Construct, Deconstruct. The Paradox of Clay Animation. *Filmvilág* 2010/5. pp. 24–27.
- 7.) Two Dimensional Manoeuvres. *Anilogue* 2010. *Filmvilág* 2011/2. pp. 34–36.

Selected lectures on the themes of the dissertation:

- 1.) June 2008: Back to the Past: Old-fashioned Animation in Recent Partly Animated Live-Action Films (NECS – the Budapest Conference)
- 2.) October 2008: Double Reflection. Transition Forms Between the Animated and the Live-Action Film (Filmklubszövetség, Kecskemét)
- 3.) January 2010: The Liberation of Prometheus: genres in literature and film (Katona József Könyvtár, Kecskemét)
- 4.) February 2010: Music, Dance, Choreography and Self-Expression in Live-Action and Animated Films (Otthon mozi, Kecskemét)
- 5.) April 2010: Theatre of Blood and Puppets: Vincent Price as Star of the Horror Genre and the Animated Film (ELTE BTK, Budapest)
- 6.) May 2010: Genre Characteristics in the Animated Film (University of Exeter)
- 7.) July 2010: The Appearance of Genre Characteristics in Hungarian Animated Films (Animation Evolution Conference, Edinburgh)
- 8.) October 2010: Paper, Screen, Monitor: Towards an Intermedial Approach of the Animated Film (EMTE, Kolozsvár, Film in the Post-Media Age Conference)
- 9.) December 2010: The Animated Film and the Reflection of Reality (Otthon mozi, Kecskemét)